

# Does Ethnicity Decide Whether an Athlete is Intelligent or Athletic?

## An examination of the language used to describe quarterbacks in online draft profiles

*Elias Ansgar Lykke Lund*

*Aarhus University*

*202005484@post.au.dk / ansgarlykke@gmail.com*

*&*

*Peter Katballe-Kristensen*

*Aarhus University*

*201206604@post.au.dk / pkatballe@gmail.com*

### Abstract

*This paper explores how draft profiles made by sports outlets describe and talk about athletes. More specifically it seeks to examine if ethnicity plays a role in the words and phrases used to describe the abilities of American football quarterbacks' abilities. This paper investigates the research question: Does ethnicity play a role in what words and phrases are used to describe quarterbacks in their draft profiles and could these descriptions be a case of linguistic discrimination? The question is answered through an examination of draft profiles from two sports outlets. Through a combination of conceptual and thematic analysis, 132 draft profiles of 66 quarterbacks were examined for words or phrases that described the player. These words or phrases were then coded which gave us 13 specific concepts that we divided into three different concept categories: 1. intelligence, 2. athleticism and 3. personality. Through these specific concepts we found that white quarterbacks on average received 1.68 positive specific concepts relating to intelligence, 0.34 relating to athleticism and 1.34 for personality compared to African American quarterbacks who received 0.95 for intelligence, 1.77 for athleticism and 0.95 for personality. Therefore, we find that the ethnicity of a quarterback plays a significant role in relation to what words or phrases are used to describe their abilities. Specifically white quarterbacks are more likely to be described as intelligent while their African American counterparts are more likely to be described as superior athletes.*

### 1. Introduction: The Ecosystem of the NFL

Language can play an important role in changing our attitudes or our opinions regarding the things that surround us. It is well-established within the literature of sociolinguistics that the descriptions used by media and experts can affect the public's perception of what is being described (Ferruci and Tandoc 2017, 42), and considering the immense importance of football in American culture, it is similarly important to examine the linguistic landscape associated with the game and its players. The National Football League (NFL) accounted for 75 of the top 100 most viewed broadcasts in America in 2021 (Karp 2022). The viewers' impressions of the teams and the players are likely

influenced by the discourse surrounding this huge cultural enterprise. This paper explores the language used in draft profiles to describe characteristics of NFL quarterbacks. The ecosystem of the NFL is dependent on new players coming into the league through the NFL draft, where the teams select new players through seven rounds. In this paper, we focus on the position of the quarterback which can best be described as a playmaker or game manager. The quarterbacks are responsible for understanding the strategies of the opposing team's defense and make 'chess-moves' of their own to counter it. It is a position that is perceived to be dependent on both the physical attributes and the mental processing of information (Kissel 2013). In the 2021 NFL season, 1220 - or roughly 71% of the 1652 NFL players - were people of color (Chinni 2022). However, only about one in four starting quarterbacks were of African American heritage (Bhanpuri et al. 2020; Bhanpuri et al. 2021; Rosenthal 2022).

## 2. Athletics and ethnicity biases: A literature review

Throughout history, African Americans have been subject to all kinds of discrimination and racism: from the horrible institution of slavery to Jim Crow (Jenkins 2017, 118). The challenges for African American athletes and biases shown in present-day sports journalism are notions that have been examined extensively in the literature.

Such biases can be found in Dufur (1997), who examined how white athletes and black athletes were used differently in advertising. The study reported that white athletes were described as showing traits such as intelligence, leadership, acquired skills, or work ethic while African American athletes were described as being successful due to physical abilities such as strength, speed, or size (Dufur 1997, 350). This has led to athletes being viewed through a "black brawn vs. white brain distinction" (Jackson 1989, in Buffington and Fraley 2008, 293). Furthermore, it is argued by Buffington that the position of the quarterback is almost synonymous with racial meaning (2005, 19) in that earlier ideas and assumptions about the characteristics of a successful quarterback did not mix with the stereotypes of African American athleticism. Thus, African Americans were automatically disqualified from consideration due to racial prejudice of not having the mental ability to play quarterback (Buffington 2005, 20). The same notions were also found by Buffington and Fraley (2008) in a study of college students' perception of race in sports.

An explanation for these notions of racially divided skillsets can be found in the "Black Superiority Myth" - an idea that African American athletes have a biological advantage, being stronger and faster than their white counterparts (Entine 2000, 18-19). Part of this notion takes its origin in the myth that white slaveowners forced the strongest slaves to reproduce to end up with slaves that were biologically superior (Entine 2000, 71). This belief is problematic for African Americans because support for their *physical* superiority then "indirectly contributes to the belief that the African American athlete is mentally and intellectually inferior to the white athlete" (Sailes 1993, 90). The "Black Superiority Myth" is based on assumptions, which cannot be empirically tested through research (Sailes 1993, 91), and it is a cultural myth that is not taken seriously in academia. Furthermore, Buffington and Fraley (2008, 306) argue that the abilities attributed to African American players are far less useful outside of the field in relation to employment opportunities,

whereas the abilities attributed to white players have a much broader scope for potential employment. Thereby for the white athlete “athletics become a training ground” where they can improve skills making them “valued citizens” while the African American athletes are restricted to on-field success (306). While being described as athletic can be viewed as a positive stereotype, such stereotypes are still extremely problematic if they tether “skin color to innate ability” (306).

Hartmann (2000) brings up two seemingly contrasting beliefs about sport as a racial force. In the first belief which he calls *The Popular Ideology*, it is argued that sport has the potential to be a positive force in society that can work for progressive issues. (p233). However, in the belief called *The Scholarly Critique*, he argues that academics who research the field of sports often find that sports do not work for progressive issues. Instead, the field of sports is a place in which prejudice and inequality are not necessarily overcome, but rather a place for these views to be spread, reproduced, or reinforced (234-235). In other words, Hartmann argues that the field of sports is a place where racial stereotypes and hurtful racial slights can continue as an everyday occurrence. Thus, in sports “racial images, ideologies, and inequalities are constructed, transformed, and constantly struggled over” - what he refers to as the contestation of racial terrain (230). Furthermore, the myth of black athletic superiority is a social construct that provides a “telling insight into deeply problematic cultural assumptions” (232). This ties into the notion of *microaggressions*. In the context of this paper, usage of the term is inspired by the definition of microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards persons of color” (Sue et al 2007, 271). Thereby it does not matter if the person making the comment does not intend for a negative stereotype or comment to be spread. This ties into Buffington and Fraley’s (2008, 306) suggestion that even though the stereotype is “positive” it can still result in negative outcomes being communicated and negative racial stereotypes being spread about African Americans – a further continuation of the contested racial terrain that Hartmann argued existed.

It is thus clear that for many academics the notion of an innate athletic superiority related to race is a construct that says more about the society and culture than it says about biological or physiological facts. This makes the spread of the “Black brawn - White brain” distinction even more problematic since it continues to spread a hurtful stereotype.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 *Mixing Conceptual and Thematic Analysis*

We find inspiration for our methodological framework in *conceptual analysis*, which at its core is a method for examining a text for the presence of specific words or phrases. It thus involves reading through a data set in order to identify certain *concepts* that occur several times throughout. A concept is defined as “a single idea regardless of whether it is represented by a single word or a phrase” (Carley 1990, 2). Within conceptual analysis, there are two types of analyses that are central to conducting the research: explicit concepts and implicit concepts. The explicit concepts are

phrases that actually occur in the text, while the implicit concepts are phrases that only occur by implication. In other words, the two kinds of concepts can refer to the same overall concept, but the implicit concept is phrased as an “alternate phrase for the same basic idea” (2). This allowed us to identify similar ideas expressed in different ways.

Conceptual analysis is usually an automated process where the researcher gets a computer to assist in the quantitative aspects of the research. However, since we did our quantitative research as part of a qualitative reading and re-reading of our data, we are also inspired by the reflexive process from *thematic analysis* suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006, 82). They argue that a thematic analysis can be used to find *themes* within a text and these themes are defined as “patterns anchored by a shared idea, meaning or concept” (Braun and Clarke 2022, 8). We combine the overall “concept” methodology as suggested by Carley (1990) with the “reflexive” methods suggested by Braun and Clarke since both methods are looking for repeated or shared concepts, regardless of their respective terminology. This combination of methodology allows us to closely examine every word to determine if it belongs to a certain concept or not. Furthermore, it allows us to expand or revisit the concepts as we read through our data. This leads to us having a more complete overview of our concepts as a result.

For our purpose, it meant that we applied some of the eight steps for conducting thematic analysis as suggested by Carley (1993, 81-87): (1) level of analysis, (2) interactive concept choices, (3) level of generalization, (4) level of implication for concepts, (5) existence versus frequency, and finally (6) number of concepts. The two steps that were excluded were *Irrelevant Information* and *Creation of Translation Rules*. These were excluded because they both apply more to researchers that use digital tools for their coding.

First, we decided that our level of analysis should include both words and phrases since this would give the most complete picture of our data. Secondly, we had two predefined specific categories (*Intelligence* and *Athleticism*) but expanded this to also include *Personality* as the process continued. Then we decided for the level of generalization that explicit words or phrases should be coded as the same specific concept. For example, the phrases “hard worker”, “working hard” and “work ethic” were all coded as belonging to the same specific concept, namely *work ethic as positive*. For the level of implication, we decided to code for both explicitly present as well as implied specific concepts. We decided to code for existence rather than frequency; this means that we only counted unique instances of a word or phrase occurring as a description of a player. As an example, if a player was described as “intelligent” on three separate occasions, we only counted this as one instance of the word for that player instead of the frequency. This was done in an attempt to avoid outliers skewing the data.

### 3.2 The Process of Gathering Data

As the textual data for our analysis, we decided to examine NFL players’ draft profiles, which are sports journalists’ evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of college athletes. For many fans, a player’s draft profile will be their first introduction to them, and the description of the individual

players may therefore have a big impact on how they are perceived by the general audience even before they ever play in the NFL.

We decided to look at players drafted in the first three rounds of the NFL Drafts from 2010 to 2022. We had two reasons for doing so: accessibility and the amount of content created. First, it is more likely that today's draft profiles are created digitally and are thus more accessible than the profiles that were published in newspapers and sports magazines, because of the rise in popularity of the internet since the late 1990s. Second, after 2010 the NFL Draft has become a three-night primetime event that is broadcast on national television, attracting a big audience.

Finally, we were interested in the role of ethnicity because, despite non-White players amounting to 70% of the player base in 2014, only 19% of the quarterbacks were non-White (Reid and McManus n.d.). This is an interesting discrepancy that we wanted to explore. We set up two criteria to determine a player's ethnicity:

1. They state themselves that they are of a certain ethnicity
2. Someone else states they are of a certain ethnicity

If 1 and 2 proved impossible we resorted to studying several photos of the player as suggested by Mercurio and Filak (2010, 63). However, this only happened seven times and only for quarterbacks from the White group. This is not surprising as "Whites" are culturally the "unmarked", whereas the African American group is the "marked" (Brekhus, 1998, 37). What characterizes "the unmarked" is that it is unarticulated and is rarely addressed despite it usually being larger than the marked (, 36). Despite there being twice the number of White quarterbacks in our study it was more difficult to find sources explicitly mentioning their ethnicity and the sources were for the most part less reliable.

Players were found to be of four different ethnicities: White (44), African American (22), Pacific Islanders (2), and Latin American (1). Initially, we focused on non-White and White as the groups when working with the data. However, since we did not find previous research that explored how it is to be an athlete of Latin American or Pacific Islander ethnicity there was not an established discourse on the experience of being an athlete of these ethnicities, or stereotypes surrounding these ethnic groups in sports, that we could elaborate on or further explore. We therefore decided to exclude the Latin Americans and Pacific Islanders from our data and decided to focus only on two ethnicities: White and African American as the two groups for our quarterbacks. As is evident in our literature review, we can tap into the discourse on the different experiences and the stereotypes surrounding these different ethnic groups.

In order to collect our data, we primarily looked at draft profiles from two different sports outlets that we knew focused on draft coverage, namely Walter Football and Bleacher Report. These two were our primary sources for the draft profiles but whenever one of them did not have a draft profile of a certain player we supplemented this with other sports outlets, such as the official website of the NFL or Sports Illustrated. The reason why we could supplement with other sports outlets was because we were not interested in what Walter and Bleacher said specifically but more the general discourse around the draft prospects. When this was necessary, we selected the first draft profile to

occur in a search on Google. Examples are Mitchell Trubisky and DeShone Kizer, for neither of whom there were draft profiles from Bleacher Report. This meant that we had to supplement with other draft profiles, namely, NFL.com for Trubisky and Sports Illustrated for Kizer. In total we had to find other sources eight times out of 132. As mentioned, we looked at every quarterback picked in the first three rounds from 2010 to 2022, which after the exclusion of the one Latin American and the two Pacific Islanders, amounted to a total of 66 quarterbacks. This meant that we had a total of 132 draft profiles that we gathered in a data set as a basis for our research.

### 3.3 Applying conceptual analysis to our data

Initially, we had four overall concept categories based on our coding of specific concepts: *Athleticism*, *Intelligence*, *Leadership*, and *Work ethic as positive*. However, as we continued to read through our data, we revised our concept categories since we found that *leadership* and *work ethic as positive* were often used to portray general observations about the *Personality* of a player. This ultimately meant that we classified data in terms of 13 specific concepts which were divided into the three concept categories: *Intelligence*, *Athleticism*, and *Personality* (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Overview of concepts included in concept categories

Concept category:	Specific concepts included:
<b>Intelligence</b>	(a) “Intelligent” (b) “smart” (c) “football IQ” (d) “decision making as positive” (e) “decision making as negative” (f) “progressions/reads as positive” (g) “progressions/reads as negative”
<b>Athleticism</b>	(h) “positive modifier + athlete” (i) “Runner” (j) “dual-threat”
<b>Personality</b>	(k) “Leader/leadership” (l) “positive modifier + character” (m) “work/work ethic as positive”.

This revision of our concepts categories meant that we expanded our *Intelligence* concept category to include the specific concepts: *smart*, *intelligent*, and *football-IQ* since these words were all explicitly related to a player's perceived intelligence. These three words are examples of what Carley (1990, 2) refers to as explicit concepts. Furthermore, several of the players were either getting berated or praised for their *decision-making* or their ability to do *reads/progressions*. In other words, this is an example of what Carley (2) refers to as implicit concepts. *Reads/progressions* cover the ability to progress through several options of what to do with the ball in a game situation, or to 'read' what the opposing defense is doing, and both are football terms that correspond largely to the same thing. For these two specific concepts, we also included positive and negative modifiers for the words. Our reasoning for doing this was that as we read through the data, we found that these phrases were often used to describe quarterbacks who struggled with *reads/progressions* and *decision-making*. We wanted to examine if there was a pattern to these specific concepts and if a potential pattern was related to the other specific concepts within this concept category.

For our *Athleticism* concept category, we decided on the specific concepts of athletes being *runners* or *dual-threats* as well as a positive modifier in combination with the word *athlete* to form the third specific concept. For this specific concept, we decided to not include *good* as a positive modifier. Our reasoning for this is that these athletes are already among the top athletes in the United States – potentially among some of the best in the world, so being a “good athlete” can to a certain degree be expected (Tonge 2008). For this concept category, we wanted to focus on the idea of exceptional athleticism to see if being described as a great, or at least better than good, athlete was to some degree dependent on a player's ethnicity. Our analysis was informed by our background knowledge of the game of football, as evident in the specific concept *dual-threat*.

First, being a *dual-threat* means that the player is equally “dangerous” as a runner as he is as a passer, i.e., very skilled at throwing and passing the ball. Furthermore, the specific concept *runner* refers to the quarterback having the athletic ability to outrun or avoid the defense while running with the ball. Usually, this is not viewed as the primary option of how to apply a quarterback's skill set and we thus counted it as an instance of someone being described as having superior athletic abilities. An example of this is one African American quarterback who was described as an “electric and dangerous runner”. For the *runner* specific concept, we also counted instances of draft profiles noting that a player could “hurt defenses on the ground” or describing players as “dual-threats”, since these are examples of implicit concepts. Both of these specific concepts are used to describe a person's superior athletic abilities and how being a better *runner* or a *dual-threat* is due to an athletic advantage.

Finally, we combined the two formerly independent concept categories of *Leadership* and *Work ethic as pos.* into one combined *personality* concept category and included the *positive modifier plus character* as the last specific concept relating to this concept category.

However, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022, 285), we also continued a collaborative effort of discussing if specific concepts should be included, or if we stretched their semantic meanings by including them. Examples of these discussions included but were not limited to, specific concepts

such as *pocket passer* or *footwork*. For these specific concepts, we thought that including a specific concept such as pocket passer in our data would mean that we interpreted this specific concept as focusing on the mental aspects of the game. However, it is not inherent in the specific concept that this is the case when the notion is viewed in a football context. In short, it refers to someone who is good at passing the ball from the so-called “pocket” that the offensive line creates when they protect their quarterback from the defense by blocking access. It is not inherently a limiting trait and we thus decided not to count this as a specific concept relating to our *Intelligence* concept category. We also decided not to count “footwork” because it is too hard to quantify or qualify what “good footwork” means: It is difficult to place as either belonging to the *Athleticism* concept category or the *Intelligence* concept category and trying to force it into either concept category would mean a significant interpretation of the term.

#### 4. Results

Table 2: Specific concepts used to describe quarterbacks in relation to the concept category of *Intelligence* in number of occurrences

Specific concepts	White (total = 44)	African-American (total = 22)
(a) “Intelligent”	20	6
(b) “Smart”	16	2
(c) “Football IQ”	10	2
(d) “Decision making” as pos.	13	5
(e) “Decision making” as neg.	10	5
(f) “Reads/progressions” as pos.	15	6
(g) “Reads/progressions” as neg.	8	14

Results of specific concepts present in the 132 draft profiles for 66 White and African American quarterbacks are presented here by the three overall concept categories as established in the previous section. Table 2, as well as Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show our results from the *Intelligence* concept category. It is immediately noticeable that White quarterbacks are more often described with words or phrases commenting on their intelligence when compared to African American quarterbacks. In this concept category White quarterbacks on average receive 1.68 positive specific concepts relating to *Intelligence* and on average 0.41 negative specific concepts, while African American quarterbacks on average receive 0.95 positive specific concepts and 0.90 negative specific concepts.

In order to find the average amount of specific concepts, we divided the total number of instances of specific concepts with the total number of White or African American quarterbacks. The percentages show some interesting differences: 36.4% of White quarterbacks were defined, explicitly, as being *smart*, while only 9.10% of African American quarterbacks received the same explicit description. However, another interesting finding can be seen in Figure 1.2; despite the two groups of quarterbacks not receiving a significantly different score in *decision-making*, African



American quarterbacks still were much more likely to receive criticism for their ability to do reads/progressions, with a 63.6% chance of occurrence compared to the 18.2% for White quarterbacks.

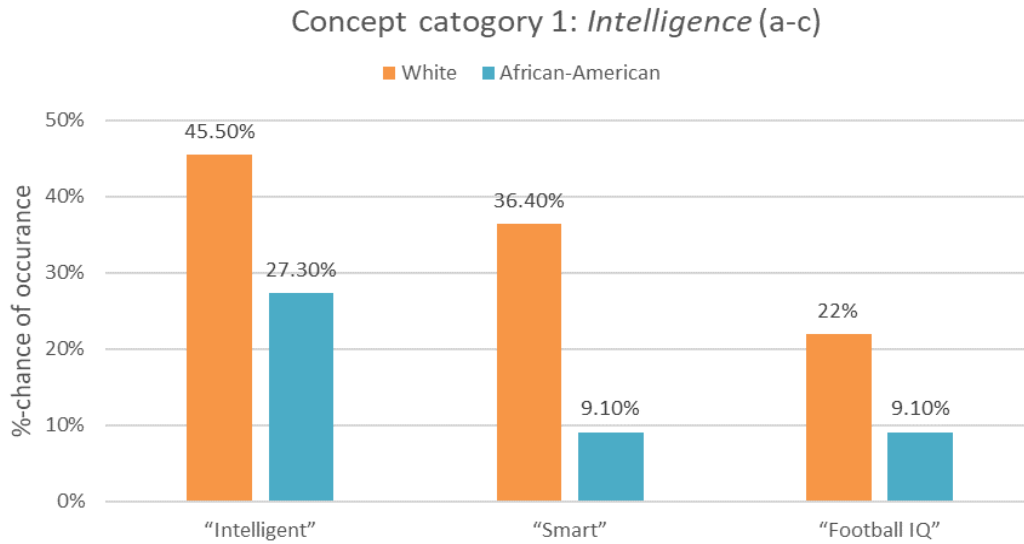


Figure 1.1: Specific concepts used to describe quarterbacks in relation to the concept category of *Intelligence* in percentage chance

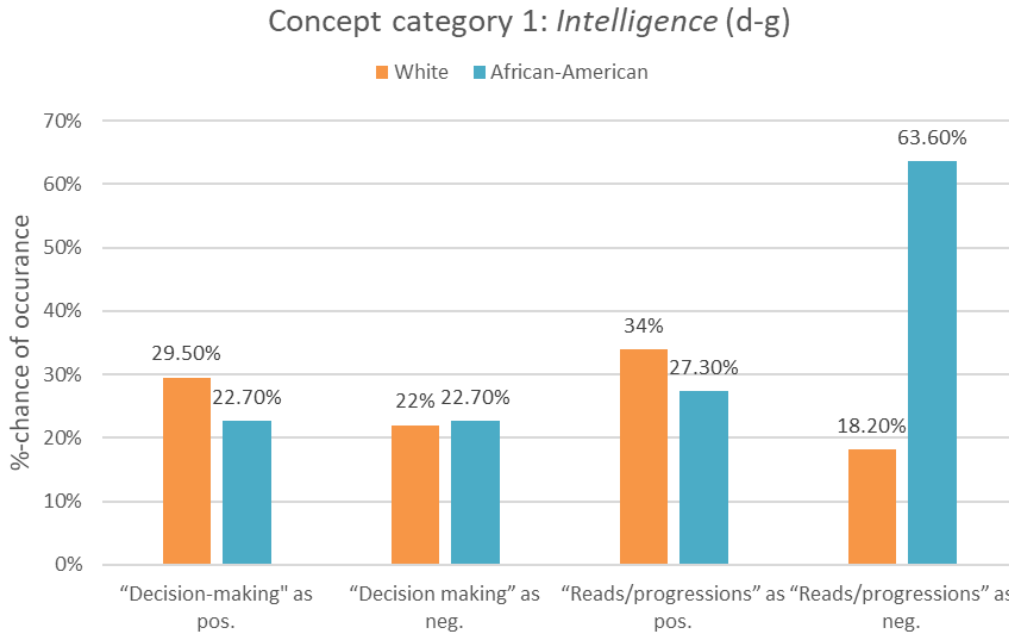


Figure 1.2: Specific concepts used to describe quarterbacks in relation to the concept category of *Intelligence* in percentage chance

This picture changed when we looked at the second concept category: *Athleticism*. Here we found that African American quarterbacks are far more likely to be described as uniquely athletic. While 72.7% of African American quarterbacks were described as being better than good athletes the same was only true for 16% of White quarterbacks. This staggering difference is also visible with the word *runner*: Here the difference is even larger with 77.3% of African American quarterbacks receiving this description and only 16% of White quarterbacks. Meanwhile, 27.3% of African American quarterbacks were perceived as good enough at both passing and running to be considered *dual-threats*, while the same evaluation was only given to 2.2% of White quarterbacks; in other words, only a single White quarterback received this descriptive phrase. Here, it should be noted that the specific concept *dual-threat* is a quite rare moniker to be given since it often refers to someone with a very unique athletic skill set. To illustrate this only 10% of the quarterbacks in our data received this description. Finally, a White quarterback will on average receive 0.34 specific concepts relating to the concept category of *Athleticism* while an African American quarterback on average will be described with 1.77 specific concepts relating to the concept category of *Athleticism*, which is a considerably large difference within this concept category. Furthermore, it is an even larger discrepancy between the two groups than there was in the concept category of *Intelligence*.

Table 3: Specific concepts used to describe quarterbacks in relation to the concept category of *Athleticism* in number of occurrences

Specific concepts	White (total = 44)	African-American (total = 22)
(h) *Positive modifier + “athlete”	7	16
(i) “Runner”	7	17
(j) “Dual-threat”	1	6

\*In this concept we exclude the word “good” since being a “good athlete” does not really say much, because to be a quarterback in the NFL you have to at least be a good athlete.

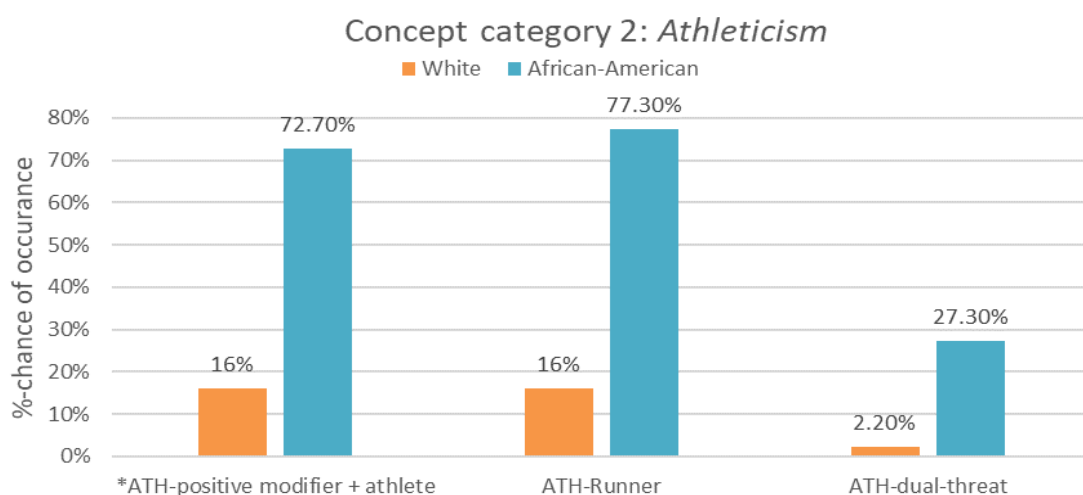


Figure 2: Specific concepts used to describe quarterbacks in relation to the concept category of *Athleticism* in percentage chance

Table 4: Specific concepts used to describe quarterbacks in relation to the concept category of *Personality* in number of occurrences

<i>Specific concepts</i>	<i>White (total = 44)</i>	<i>African-American (total = 22)</i>
(k) "Leader / leadership"	24	8
(l) Positive modifier + "character"	15	5
(m) "Work / work ethic"	20	8

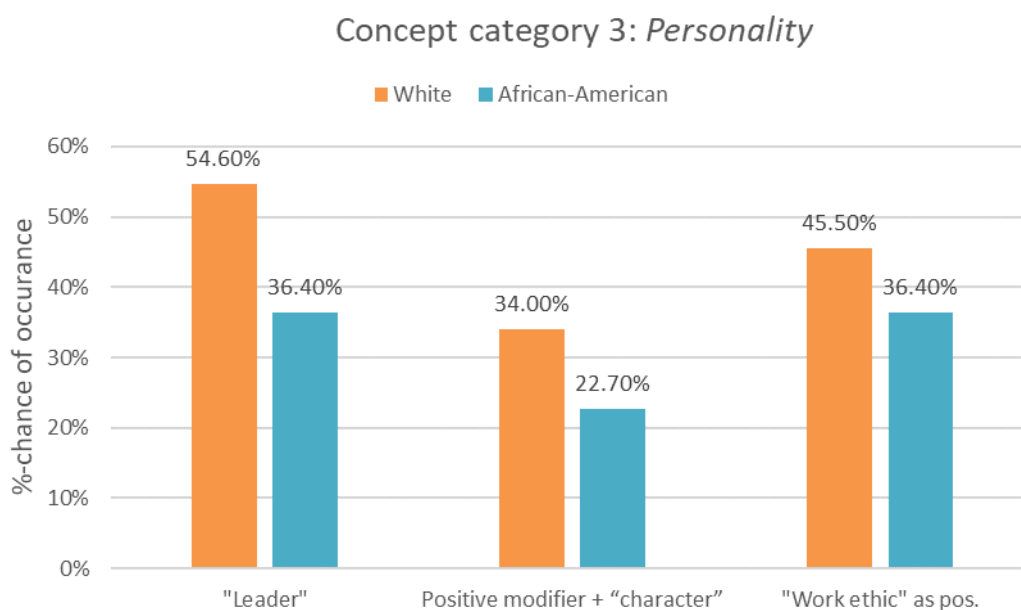


Figure 3: Specific concepts used to describe quarterbacks in relation to the concept category of *Personality* in percentage chance

Finally, in the concept category of *personality*, we once again find that White quarterbacks are more likely to be described in positive ways when describing a player as a leader, a high character individual, or as having a positive *work ethic*. We found that 54.6% of White quarterbacks were described as leaders while only 36.4% of African Americans received the same explicit description. While not showing a difference as significant in the specific concepts *work ethic as pos.* and *positive modifier plus character*, it is still interesting to note that White quarterbacks are more likely to be described with phrases from both concept categories. On average in this concept category, White quarterbacks receive 1.34 specific concepts relating to the concept category of *Personality*. While African Americans on average receive 0.95 specific concepts relating to the concept category of *Personality*.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 *From the literature to the NFL: similarities and differences*

In our study, we found that White athletes were more likely to be described as intelligent, smart, leaders, or hard workers. This is similar to what Mikaela Dufur (1997) found in her study of advertisements that used athletes. However, a key difference between the two studies is that we examined how the athletes were described before becoming professionals. Interestingly, in our study, we found a higher percentage of White quarterbacks being described as better than good athletes compared to what Dufur found (p. 350). However, this can be explained by the fact that Dufur examined if a highlighted skill was primarily the reason for an athlete's success, whereas we examined if a word was present or not. Our findings of skill set being viewed as having a clear racial divide are similar to what Buffington and Fraley found in their study (2008, 305). It is thus clear that players are still perceived differently based on their ethnicity; at least in our data, we found a clear divide. An interesting finding is that a higher percentage of African American quarterbacks are described as leaders or hard workers. Dufur (1997) found that only 20% of African American athletes received comments on their leadership skills whereas we found this to be true for 36.4% of the African American quarterbacks. However, this was still significantly lower than the 54.6% of White quarterbacks who received a similar description in our study. Here it would be interesting to examine if these descriptions also apply to elements of life that lie outside the field of sports. As Buffington and Fraley noted, this has not been the case for African American athletes previously; the success of African American athletes was limited to elements within the field of sports while their White counterparts reaped the benefits of a training ground for the life after sports (2008, 306). It would thus be important to investigate if this fact has changed in the present-day NFL since we indeed found that African American athletes were also described as being leaders, hard workers, and high-character individuals. Our results thus support earlier research on this topic, and it suggests that the position of quarterback is still ascribed a lot of racial meaning and that there is still an inherent difference in how these players are evaluated and described.

Here it is interesting to view these descriptions of the different groups as an instance of microaggressions. On one hand, these draft profiles at their core are meant to communicate a message about their football abilities. On the other hand, although they communicate commonplace daily verbiage in the NFL community, they still “communicate hostile, derogatory or negative slights” against people of color (Sue et al 2007, 270). It is clear that describing an African American athlete as just being successful due to superior athletic abilities is a very limiting description. Furthermore, if we return to our *reads/progressions* specific concept from our results, we see that 63.6% of African American quarterbacks were criticized for struggling in this specific concept compared to the 18.2% of their White counterparts. In light of our results, we view this as an example of microaggressions where it is a comment on the intelligence of the athlete, suggesting that he struggles with this aspect of the game. These comments are meant to communicate commonplace football knowledge but can also in light of our results be viewed as a microaggression since it communicates a negative slight against these players. We also found more

explicit examples of the draft profiles commenting on an African American player's perceived intelligence: In these examples, the negative judgments of intelligence were communicated more explicitly if you combine what was said with a knowledge of the game. One example is a player who was described as having "alarmingly low Wonderlic scores"<sup>1</sup> (Campbell n.d.), which meant he would not be able to make "complex professional reads" (Miller 2018). Another player was described as not being able to "handle much more complexity than a simple read-option running game" (Bloom 2013). It should be noted that a "read-option running game" is one of the simplest forms of offense being used in the NFL. Therefore, saying that a player will struggle with this kind of offense must be viewed as a very explicit way of questioning the intelligence of the player. These are some examples of the more explicit instances of evaluators commenting on a player's perceived intelligence.

### *5.2 Is this linguistic discrimination?*

We would argue that our findings can constitute linguistic discrimination against African American athletes. White quarterbacks were more often described as being intelligent and smart, and they were more likely to be described as leaders, while African American quarterbacks were mostly defined as being better than good athletes, without receiving the same praise for their mental abilities and leadership. As Buffington and Fraley note these "positive" stereotypes are not necessarily "traditional" racism but they are still problematic since they "produce problematic conceptions of 'race'" (2008, 306). Furthermore, Lippi-Green notes that "stereotypes do not have to be overtly negative to be problematic and limiting" (2012, 105).

We would thus argue that these ways of describing the players are clear instances of linguistic discrimination since it seems that ethnicity is a clear indicator of what specific concepts the quarterbacks were described with. Furthermore, they continue to perpetuate the "Black brawn - White brain" distinction. Even though the African American quarterbacks were celebrated for their perceived superior athleticism, they simultaneously received negative remarks towards their intelligence. This is problematic because as Hartmann (2000, 230-233) noted, sports have the potential to change people's attitudes towards other people and affect real change in society. However, it can also be counter-productive to progress by spreading stereotypes about people based on race and thus having broader societal consequences.

### *5.3 Reflections on our methodology and position as researchers*

When coding the data, we were aware of potential biases in relation to our hypothesis because of confirmation bias. When a researcher gathers information from different sources there is a risk that the researcher looks for instances that confirm their own assumptions (Rabin and Schrag 1999, 68-69). Attempts to reduce such biases were taken prior to data collection in that we selected the two

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<sup>1</sup> The Wonderlic Test is an IQ test that the players take as part of the evaluation process.

sports outlets before doing the conceptual analysis. This meant that we did not have the opportunity to cherry-pick from a specific draft profile that stated things that would confirm our hypothesis.

Furthermore, some of the specific concepts we created could be seen as problematic but all of the words or phrases that were chosen to be coded to certain specific concepts were actively discussed and challenged as part of a collaborative effort. An example of this is our decision to code the word “book-smart” as an instance of the specific concept of *smart* as it could be argued that there is a difference between *smart* and “book-smart”. Another example could be having to code some of the more context-dependent phrases such as the specific concept *reads/progressions* in both negative and positive instances. An example of a phrase being coded as belonging to the specific concept *reads/progressions* as negative, is the African American player Kellen Mond where the draft profile said that he “will hang on reads and ‘wish’ his receivers open” (Tice 2021a). When combining what is actually said with knowledge of the football context, you understand that this could be interpreted in a negative way. Namely, that “hang on reads” means being slow at processing what the opposing defense is doing. An example of coding *reads/progressions* as a positive was done for the White quarterback Kyle Trask who was described as having a “good mental clock on his progressions” (Tice 2021b). When seen in a football context this means that the player goes through his progressions rapidly and that he has the mental capacity to do so. We would argue that this is a positive interpretation for the specific concept of *reads/progressions*. Another example is the phrase “hurt defenses on the ground” as being an instance of the specific concept *runner*. This phrase could easily have been omitted if you lack an understanding of the surrounding context within the game. Seen in this context, it means that a player is able to run the ball well which makes it count towards the specific concept runner.

Rabin and Schrag (1999, 48) argue that a researcher can misinterpret or misunderstand signals from their data that are in direct conflict with the researcher’s belief. Therefore, it is important to be aware that our biases and subjectivity can have influenced our interpretation of the draft profiles. But on the other hand, some researchers argue that this subjectivity might instead be a useful resource that can be used to the researcher’s advantage (Gough et al. 2012, 382). If another person wanted to research the same as we have done and they had no knowledge or understanding of the NFL they might have missed some of the implicit concepts. In this sense, our previous knowledge of the context of the NFL and our subjective interpretation of some of the specific concepts could be seen as an advantage, since these implicit concepts were easier to identify.

Another potential issue with this paper is its limited dataset. We were two researchers who decided to code our data manually. While doing it manually has its benefits such as being able to pay more attention to the implicit concepts, it is also more time-consuming than programming a computer to do it. Ideally, we would have compiled a much larger amount of data so we could have made observations that were based on texts from numerous different sources. We are aware that basing our claims on just two draft profiles per player can make the grounds for analysis seem weaker. However, we still found a general pattern that was similar to the findings from other studies in the field of sociology. It could be interesting to further explore this issue by examining if the same

patterns can be found in sportscasting or in how fans debate and discuss their favorite players online.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper seeks to explore the language used to describe athletes in online draft profiles. This study finds that the ethnicity of a quarterback correlates with the words and phrases that are typically used when describing their abilities. We argue that White quarterbacks are more likely to be described as intelligent and as good leaders with a good work ethic while African American quarterbacks are more likely to be described as better athletes. Meanwhile, African American quarterbacks are much more unlikely to receive a positive description based on intelligence. Thus, this paper reports yet another instance of the “Black brawn - White brain” dichotomy. However, contrary to earlier studies, this study has found that African American quarterbacks to some extent received descriptors of their leadership skills. Finally, we argue that these ways of describing quarterbacks are examples of microaggressions and linguistic discrimination since they contribute to the spreading of racially based stereotypes.

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